

Route 8 bridge project a quick, but not simple job

29 June 2016 by Barnhart

For more than a week, people in 88,000 vehicles that travel Route 8/25 each day got a lesson in new bridge construction in a city named Bridgeport.

First, there was a traffic shift that had southbound traffic shifted to the northbound lanes. Then, there were days of demolition where heavy equipment turned the 44-year-old Lindley Street and Capitol Avenue bridges into piles of rubble. Soon, there were two gaping holes in the highway where the bridges once stood. Then, on Thursday, people started to see a different kind of bridge construction starting to emerge in Bridgeport when a huge, 16-axle flatbed truck carried segments of the pre-built, weathered-steel bridge along city streets to a construction site off Lindley Street.

It was the latest and most visible phase of a "design-bid-build" project that has compressed what is normally a two-year construction period into a matter of months, and replaced seven separate bridge spans with just two.

Although the state Department of Transportation has used the accelerated bridge construction method - where the bridge is built off-site and then dropped into place with large cranes - a few times, this is the first time the bidder helped design the project.

A new approach

"The 'design-bid-build' is a contract where the DOT draws up only partial plans, and asks bidders to show us how they would accomplish what we need," said Scott Adkins, the project manager. "We would choose the best value for the contract winner."

Where the state would normally put final plans out to bid and ask for a price on that specific scope of work, the plans for the Route 8/25 bridge replacement were only 60 percent complete when the job was put out to bid.

"We actually started construction without final plans," Adkins said. "We began last May, and didn't have the final plans until December."

By overlapping the designing and building phases and choosing a team to work cooperatively, the impact and disruption to traffic are reduced.

Thursday looked more like a military siege than a work zone, but that is because of the compressed time frame. There were 23 State Police troopers and several Bridgeport police officers directing traffic and setting up detours around the work zone.

Large segments of the new bridge were brought by truck to the southbound side of the highway over busy city streets. The route included Boston Avenue, North Avenue, Capitol Avenue and Lindley Street.

Sections of the route were closed to traffic for much of the day; Lindley Street between North and Capitol avenues was to remain closed all day, police said.

State police have been busy in the work zone, handling traffic accidents and enforcing motor vehicle laws. There were 10 accidents and 38 infractions issued on Route 8 between Exit 5 and Exit 1 from June 5 to 13, said Trooper First Class Kelly Grant, the state police spokeswoman.

Grant said there were eight motor vehicle accidents and 16 infraction tickets issued from May 15 to 23, the period before the lane shifts began and before the Memorial Day holiday.

Although moving the bridge segments was the most visual part of the project - and it will be repeated on the northbound side next month - a lot of work has been going on behind the scenes.

"We've been building retaining walls, doing drainage work and other site work for months, and in this phase we've been working 24/7 since Saturday, and we'll be going 24/7 until this phase is done on June 25," Adkins said.

Crossover plans

The seven bridges that had once carried the highway over Lindley Street will be reduced to two, with earthen fill under the roadbed replacing the site of the old Bridgeport Machine Co. When Route 8/25 was built, the factory was operating and its parking lot was under the highway.

The Lindley Street (Exit 4) off-ramp is being widened to add a right turn lane, and a right turn lane is being added to Lindley Street at North Avenue.

The current phase also involves a "crossover" plan in which motorists traveling in one direction may be shifted onto the other side of the highway, along with some lane closures and realignments. The southbound on-ramp at Chopsey Hill Road is closed.

Manafort Brothers Construction, of Plainville, and Parsons Brinckerhoff are teamed on the \$35 million project, which is scheduled for completion in September.

Don't expect to live through another bridge replacement project on this stretch of road. While the old bridges had a "useful life" of 25 to 30 years, the new ones are designed to last 75 years, Adkins said.

"And they are pre-weathered steel," he said. "They'll always stay the same color, and we won't have to paint them."